



NEWS RELEASE

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Don't risk it: Tattoos carry more than your message

Tattoos causing bacterial infections

HEIDELBERG, Germany – In the past, methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA, a type of bacterial infection, was only acquired in hospitals, but about five or six years ago it began showing up unexpectedly in local communities.

Community-acquired MRSA is emerging as a major cause of skin disease, and something Soldiers should be concerned about, especially if they are thinking about getting a tattoo. Health officials at Heidelberg Army Community Hospital are seeing infections in Soldiers with tattoos.

A June 2006 report by the Centers for Disease Control stated that outbreaks “have occurred among athletes, inmates at correctional facilities, and military recruits.” The CDC investigated clusters of skin infections caused by MRSA in individuals with tattoos. CDC found that the infections were linked to unlicensed tattooists in three states. Using non-sterile equipment and lack of infection control practices were identified as potential causes of the infections.

The message is, if you are thinking about a tattoo, make sure the tattooist is licensed and that he or she practices good infection control. This means wearing gloves and changing them between clients, washing hand frequently, using an anti-bacterial solution, and disinfecting equipment and surfaces.

“Soldiers and family members are advised to avoid any tattoo establishment with questionable practices,” said Kimberly Jeffery-Wolfert, a community health nurse at the Heidelberg Army Community Hospital. Jeffery-Wolfert added that, “MRSA is easily spread by skin contact. Our concern is that the public may not recognize the seriousness of the infection and spread it to others.” Tattoo parlors aren’t the only culprit. Some of the most common places to acquire MRSA are health clubs and gyms.

Jeffery-Wolfert said community-acquired MRSA is a new variety of a common skin organism that lives in the sweat and oil glands of skin and can be very aggressive and difficult to treat. Patients with MRSA often get it several times.

Anyone may become “colonized” with MRSA. A person is considered colonized if bacteria are growing on their skin but the bacteria are not infected. Once a person is colonized with MRSA, infections may develop. Once the skin is colonized with MRSA, bacteria can rapidly multiply when there are breaks in the skin such as insect bites or razor nicks. It can cause skin abscesses such as boils. When it gets into the bloodstream it can cause more serious infections, high fevers and painful sores. The sores are often initially misdiagnosed as spider bites because they are typically painful and resemble brown recluse bites.

The risk of having a more serious or recurring MRSA infection is increased in persons who have very oily skin, are significantly overweight, get overheated and sweaty, and wear tight clothing that does not allow the skin to breathe.

Soldiers often have some of these risk factors, and are at high risk of becoming infected through direct skin contact, as well as contact with contaminated surfaces such as toilet and locker room seats.

Jeffery-Wolfert warns that Soldiers should take extra precautions to keep skin and clothing dry and clean. MRSA bacteria typically grow rapidly in warm, moist areas of the body. Places like the nose, ears, underarms, groin, skin folds, and vaginal and rectal areas are common infection sites.

“Since these infections are transmitted most frequently by direct skin-to-skin contact, protect yourself and beware of potential risk factors such as contact sports and also wiping surfaces of equipment before and after use,” said Jeffery-Wolfert. “Check out your local health club or work-out facility to ensure that they have approved cleaning products on hand and enforce policies to protect their customers,” she added.

There are other ways to protect yourself and your family from MRSA and other bacterial infections. Follow these simple steps...

- Keep your hands clean by washing thoroughly with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered until healed.
- Avoid contact with other people’s wounds or bandages.
- Do not share personal items such as towels or razors.

Jeffery-Wolfert adds this advice:

- If you believe you or someone you know has MRSA, please see your healthcare provider. If you have already seen a provider and an infection is not improving after a few days then contact them again
- If you recently received a tattoo and it is not healing well please see your healthcare provider immediately.

MRSA can be a show-stopper for deployments. Active-duty personnel who have recurrent MRSA infections may be considered non-deployable for extended periods. For more information on MRSA, see the CDC website at www.cdc.gov.